



Be more social: Overcoming shyness and social anxiety

We Thrive Together

Shyness

- If you have a lifetime of [shyness](#) under your belt, you've probably heard of well-intentioned guidance:
- "All you have to do is smile, and say hello!"
- "Just go talk to them. They won't bite."
- "Stop overthinking everything."
- This advice, of course, often comes from people who have little (if any) experience with shyness themselves. Chronic shyness goes beyond the brief feelings of uneasiness and nervousness most people experience in certain situations, like the first day of a new job.
- Truly shy people tend to feel self-conscious and uncomfortable in most social situations.
- Maybe the thought of meeting new people leaves you shaky, sweaty, and nauseous. You doubt other people have any interest in you, and, during conversations, you worry what the other person thinks about you.
- In short, shyness isn't something you can cast off simply by pasting on a smile.
- Shyness usually doesn't disappear on its own, but there are strategies that can help you take steps toward feeling more comfortable around others *and* with yourself.



Explore possible sources



- Experts generally agree that shyness develops in response to a combination of factors, like:
- genetics
- childhood environment
- life experiences
- Parenting tactics, for example, may drive shyness.
- If your parents:
- **Over-emphasized potential dangers:** You might grow up approaching unknown people and situations with extreme caution and reserve.
- **Set strict rules around what you could and couldn't do:** You might feel uncomfortable stepping beyond those limits, even in adulthood.
- **Were shy or anxious themselves:** You probably observed and eventually began to model this response.

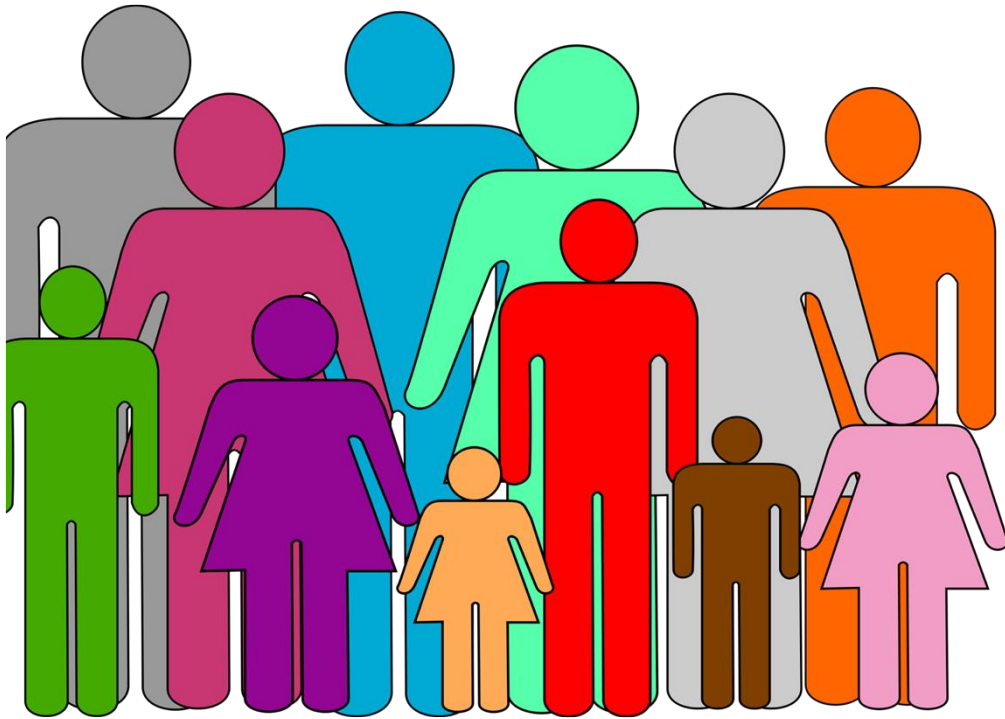
Explore possible sources

Instability in your environment can also contribute, like:

- moving often
- experiencing bullying
- living in an unsafe neighborhood
- going through major family dynamic changes due to divorce or [death](#)
- Any of these factors can have an impact on how you handle social interactions.
- Shyness can also develop in adolescence and adulthood. If you faced rejection from your peers or teachers and supervisors singled you out for criticism, it's only natural you might begin to fear the possibility of similarly humiliating experiences in the future.
- Working to uncover where shyness comes from can help you find the right tools to reshape your fear.



Determine whether it's shyness or something else



- People often think of [shyness, social anxiety, and introversion](#) as the same thing.
- Some shy people do meet the criteria for [social anxiety disorder](#) (or introversion, or both). That said, social anxiety is a mental health condition, while shyness is not.
- Social anxiety involves a persistent fear of [rejection](#), disapproval, and criticism from others. This fear might become overwhelming enough that you begin avoiding social settings entirely.
- If you're shy, you might feel uncomfortable around new people at first, but find it easier to interact the more you get to know them. Shyness won't necessarily cause the intense distress that social anxiety does.
- It's also possible that people assume you're shy when you simply prefer your own company.

Explore your strengths

- Take a moment to consider shyness from an evolutionary perspective.
- If you were outgoing, you might have ventured out to explore new areas, find resources, and interact with other communities. If you were shy, you might have stayed close to home to avoid possible threats.
- Both roles are necessary. But, while exploration might help you make new discoveries, it also puts you in the path of potential dangers. Sticking to one place keeps you safe.
- That said, it can be helpful to highlight your strengths instead of seeing shyness as a flaw. Recognizing the areas where your skills really shine can provide a boost to your self-confidence that may, in turn, help diminish feelings of self-doubt and [insecurity](#).
- Maybe you're great with animals, a talented artist, or a driven researcher. Perhaps you're a compassionate listener, and family and friends always seek your advice.
- The world needs balance, and what better way to achieve that balance than with different [personality](#) types?
- Sure, it might take you more time to open up. But you have plenty of [valuable traits](#), like empathy, sensitivity, and caution, to offer when you do.



Identify goals



If you know someone who seems to make new friends every time they walk into a room, you might envy their outgoing nature and envision yourself navigating social settings with the same ease.

That's not impossible, but it's usually more helpful to take smaller steps first.

Start by exploring the ways in which shyness affects your life:

- "I want a relationship, but I'm too shy to meet people in person."
- "Class participation makes up 5 percent of my grade. But I'm too nervous to share, because I don't know anyone."
- "I have a lot of ideas for this new project at work, but what if no one likes them?"

Then, use that list to create simple goals, like starting a conversation with a classmate or using a dating app to find potential partners.

Don't let the spotlight effect get to you

- The [spotlight effect](#), in simple terms, refers to the (generally false) assumption that other people notice everything you do and say, almost as if a spotlight were shining on you.
- This cognitive bias can easily contribute to feelings of shyness or social anxiety.
- When you worry people will notice and judge your mistakes or quirks, you're more likely to hang back on the edges of a crowd where you can safeguard yourself from possible rejection.
- In reality, though, most people tend to be less observant than you imagine — in part because they're thinking about their own spotlight. You might feel as if all eyes are on you, but that usually isn't the case.
- Not convinced? Ask yourself how much *you* notice about the people around you and what they're doing at any given time.



Be genuine

- Some shy people get through social interactions behind a mask of confidence.
- But “fake it ’til you make it” doesn’t work for everyone. Putting up a front of boldness you don’t actually feel can even leave you more anxious that everyone will see through you.
- It’s fine to admit you’re nervous or let people know you want to ease into a group at your own pace. People might even let you know how much they appreciate the effort you’re making. And their positive reactions can bolster your confidence authentically.
- Always [skip the white lies](#), even if you think pretending will keep conversations moving.
- It might seem completely harmless to tell your new roommates, “Yoga? That’s my favorite way to unwind.” But imagine how this can backfire. They might invite you to their Sunday yoga practice when, in reality, you’ve never even done a Downward-Facing Dog.
- Instead, tell the truth: “I’ve never tried yoga, but I’d like to!”

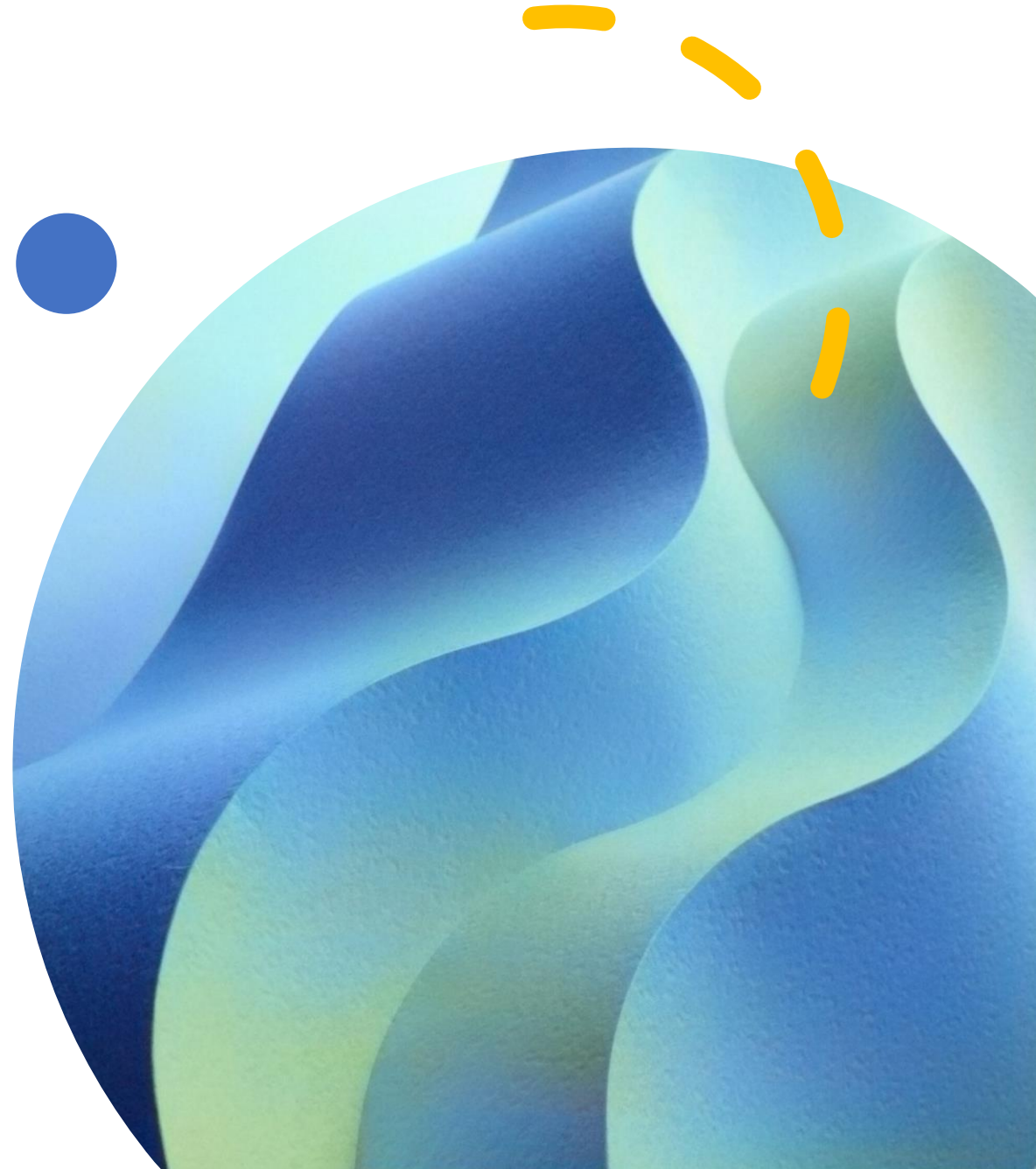
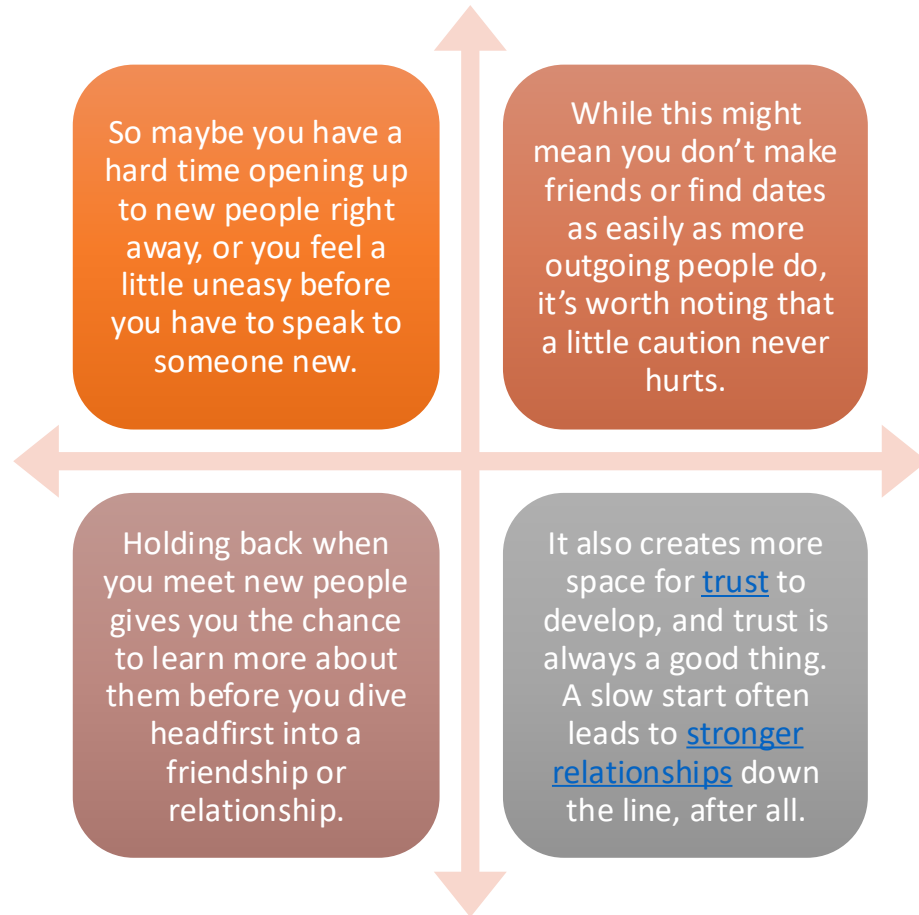




Enlist support

- Support from someone you trust can help you feel more comfortable in situations that spark the most dread.
- Of course, you can't bring someone with you everywhere you go, but the idea here is that eventually you'll feel ready to face those situations alone.
- Ask a friend, family member, or roommate to come along the next time you do something social, whether that's a quiz night, party, or just a shopping trip.
- Their presence might offer enough reassurance that you have an easier time navigating interactions without stumbling over your words or forgetting what you wanted to say.
- Some people also find it helpful to have some “practice” interactions with loved ones, so they can get used to responding to positive comments, negative feedback, and everything in between. And, don't forget, interacting with loved ones is another helpful way to sharpen [communication skills](#).
- Tip: Ask a loved one to role-play situations where you feel most uncomfortable, such as being singled out for attention.

Recognize the benefits of shyness



Accept yourself

- However your shyness came to be, at the end of the day, it's simply part of your personality.
- You can work to become less shy, but, if your shyness doesn't cause any problems, you probably don't need to push yourself to overcome it.
- For example, maybe you don't feel any particular urge to meet new people, but you have no trouble greeting someone when introduced. Perhaps you feel nervous before talking to your boss, but you handle conversations successfully when needed — even if your heart beats a little faster.
- So you don't enjoy socializing much. Not everyone does!
- If you're both shy and introverted, you might feel perfectly satisfied with your current level of social interaction, since it leaves you plenty of time to recharge and unwind on your own.



Remember: Avoidance isn't the answer



- Skipping out on social events entirely often feels a lot safer than trying your best to make friends and failing.
- Avoiding people might protect you from rejection, but the downside is that you might face [loneliness](#) instead.
- If you want to expand your social circle, you'll eventually have to find some way to [connect with others](#).
- Exploring your interests — hiking, crafting, dancing, cooking, etc. — through classes, community events, or even apps, like Meetup, can help you find potential friends and partners who share your interests.

Talk with a therapist

- Shyness itself isn't a mental health condition, but it can lead to unwanted emotional distress over time.
- If nothing seems to help you relax in social situations, a good next step might be reaching out to a professional.
- A therapist can offer guidance with:
 - managing physical symptoms you experience
 - exploring causes of shyness in more detail
 - recognizing social anxiety and other concerns
 - [challenging and reframing thoughts](#) that prompt avoidance
 - exploring strategies to navigate social situations
- Speaking of physical symptoms, you can also try some breathing or body movement exercises that are known to manage anxiety. [Start with these breathing exercises that can soothe anxiety of all kinds.](#)





Incorporate probiotics

- Fermented foods and probiotics are known to bring many physical benefits, such as digestion and cardiac health. What you might not know, though, is that according to research, probiotics can also give you a mental health boost.
- In one study, people who ate more fermented foods had fewer social anxiety symptoms. While more research is needed to solidify this link — and probiotics alone are unlikely to make social anxiety disappear completely — adding more probiotics into your diet could be a small yet effective way to help reduce some social anxiety.

Reduce caffeine and alcohol

- While adding probiotics to your diet might help lessen some social anxiety, a couple of things could also make it worse — including that morning cup of coffee or energy drink. Older [research](#) shows caffeine can increase feelings of panic and anxiety in people who already experience anxiety.
- And in an animal [study](#), consuming more caffeine in adolescence was linked to higher levels of anxiety in adulthood.
- Like caffeine, alcohol may not be the best option if you're looking to reduce feelings of social anxiety. Some people use alcohol as a social lubricant, and it can work in the short term. But if using alcohol to soothe social anxiety becomes a habit, it can make you feel more anxious in regular settings over time.
- Some [research](#) also suggests that alcohol could increase anxiety in shy people the day after drinking it. Even moderate amounts can affect your mood and anxiety level, so it's a good idea to be mindful about how often you use it to take the edge off anxiety in social settings.



Practice your smile



- The physical act of smiling could impact mood and shyness.
- In short, being happy can make us smile. But smiling can also make us happy. In one [study](#), smiling in scary situations helped shy children reduce social anxiety.
- And it's not just smiling that might help alter your mood. You can practice:
 - good posture
 - loosening the muscles in your face
 - relaxing your eyebrows
- On the other hand, research has also found that people with social anxiety might already be used to smiling more than people without it. In another [study](#), people with social anxiety smiled more often to mirror the person they were talking with.
- If you feel exhausted by the idea of smiling any more than you already do, that's OK, too.

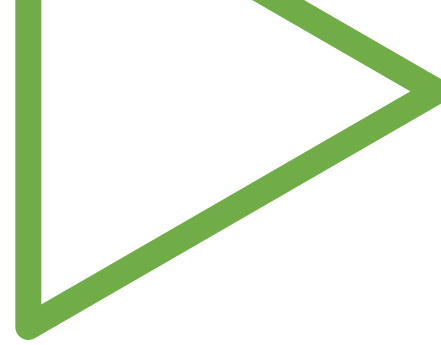
Move beyond your comfort zone

- You may be thinking: “But that’s the problem. I can’t!” The trick is in setting manageable goals for yourself.
- For example, if you’re new to running, you probably wouldn’t begin by signing up for a marathon. Instead, you might start by running only a minute at a time and walking for a while, too. The same can apply when dealing with shyness and social anxiety.
- Instead of taking on more than you can handle, you might begin by setting a goal you *know* you can complete. And that will look different for everyone.
- For one person, a good first goal might be texting a friend to say “hi.” For another, it might look like taking a walk around the park when more people are outside.
- To identify that kind of a goal, the key is to be honest with yourself about what steps you can take. If you tend to put a lot of pressure on yourself, you might need to scale back the goal to make it more manageable. Or maybe you need to push a bit [beyond your comfort zone](#).
- When it comes to identifying what’s possible given your own social anxiety or shyness, you’re the expert.



Bring in fun

- Partaking in activities you like can be a great way to manage social anxiety. By focusing your attention on something like yoga, drawing, or gardening, you can give yourself a chance to have fun without worrying about judgment from other people.
- It's important to give your mind a break from all that sometimes. Some [research](#) even notes that pursuing an activity just because it's fun is connected to better mental health and good outcomes in therapy.
- And none of what you do has to be for show or put on display. You can blog, paint, build birdhouses, or go for a bike ride all for yourself. It's all about your own enjoyment.



Reach out to a friend



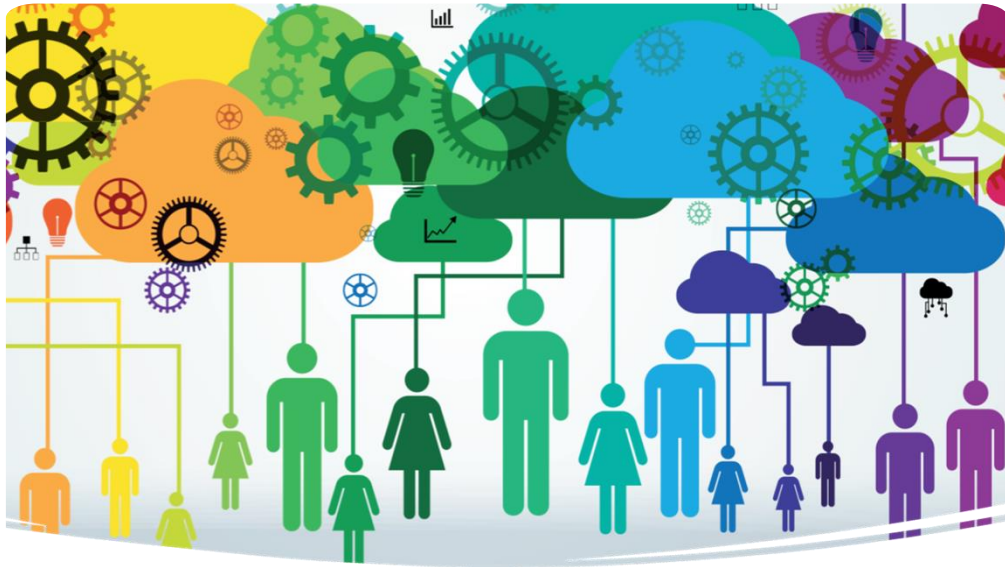
- Like one-on-one therapy, reaching out to a friend might be something that feels a little threatening if you're shy or experiencing social anxiety disorder. But if there's someone in your life you trust, [initiating conversations](#) with them can help them understand you better.
- There's no need to be [ashamed or misunderstood](#) for your social anxiety. By practicing expressing your feelings to a friend, you can learn to open up and feel more comfortable making conversation in general.

Interrogate your worries

- It may seem counterintuitive, but trying to wish away the things that cause your anxiety isn't usually the best answer. Instead, consider putting your worries on the spot.
- When you notice yourself beginning to feel anxious, you may want to identify exactly what's making you feel this way. By really focusing your attention inward and having an honest discussion with yourself about what your fears are, you may be in a better position to understand your shyness or social anxiety.



What's next?



- If you feel like you want to take more steps in learning or treating shyness and social anxiety, more resources are available for you. You can check out the [National Social Anxiety Center](#) for more info and support or [Psych Central's own resource](#) on treating social anxiety.
- There are many ways to help reduce feelings of social anxiety and live life more at ease. Finding the right solutions for you can be a process, but there's no doubt that it's a process worthwhile.